Presidential Commission
for the Study of Bioethical Issues

TRANSCRIPT
Welcome & Introductions

Meeting 1
July 9, 2010
Washington, D.C.

Amy Gutmann:
So I'd like to say good morning to all of you. I am Amy Gutmann, President of the University of Pennsylvania and Chair of the Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues. I'd like to thank you for joining us for the commission's first public meeting. I'd like to note the presence of our designated federal officer, Diane Gianelli. Diane makes this meeting legal. Thank you, Diane.

It was a great honor to be asked by President Barack Obama to serve as chair of this commission. And I am very privileged to serve alongside Vice Chair Jim Wagner, who is the President of Emory University, a dedicated educator, accomplished scientist and engineer, and, I can say with direct knowledge, a highly respected university leader. Jim and I have the good fortune of leading a group of skilled and dedicated women and men who are appointed by President Obama from across the country. The commission is composed of experts from wide-ranging fields. You will hear them during the course of this meeting ask questions. We are committed to deliberating over the course of the time that our commission works.

Just to give you a flavor of this commission, we have two MD-PhD's, one of which is a Franciscan friar. We have one RN-PhD, an MBA-patient advocate, three members of the federal government, leaders in genetics, two branches of the military, emergency medicine, and HIV/AIDS. The diverse expertise and experience of the commissioners will enhance our deliberations and inform our work moving forward.

And I'd like to begin by asking the commission members to introduce themselves and briefly describe what they do. And, everybody, by the way, there's a little button on these. Turn it on before you speak. Thank you. And the red light will go on. There you go.

Lonnie Ali:
Good morning. I'm Lonnie Ali. I'm the wife of Muhammad Ali, and I have spent the last 20-some odd years being a patient advocate and fighting for Parkinson's research and caregiver support. I'm very happy to be here today. And thank you very much, Dr. Gutmann and Dr. Wagner and commission members.

Nita Farahany:
Hi, I'm Nita Farahany. I am a Professor of Law and Philosophy at Vanderbilt where I focus on the intersection of law, science and philosophy. I'm delighted to be here today. Thank you very much.

Nelson Michael:
I'm Nelson Michael. I'm the director of the U.S. Military HIV Research Program at Walter Reed Institute of Research. And I'm also delighted to be here.

Alexander Garza:
Good morning. I am Dr. Alex Garza, the Assistant Secretary for the Office of Health Affairs at Homeland Security and the Chief Medical Officer for Homeland Security. I'm an emergency physician by training and truly honored to be serving on this commission. Thank you.

Barbara Atkinson:
Hi. I'm Barbara Atkinson, the Executive Vice-Chancellor and Dean of the Medical School at the University of Kansas. I'm a cytopathologist by training and deal with ethical issues of one sort or another every day multiple times.

John Arras:
I'm John Arras. I teach philosophy and bioethics at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. Most of my work concerns the ethics of research and global justice. I'm really honored to be on this panel.

Daniel Sulmasy:
I'm Dan Sulmasy. I'm a general internist and philosopher at the University of Chicago where I have joint appointments in the School of Medicine and the School of Divinity. So happy to be here.

Christine Grady:
Good morning. I'm Christine Grady, I'm a nurse and a philosopher. And I'm the acting chair of the Department of Bioethics at the NIH Clinical Center. And I echo what everyone said about being honored to be part of this group.

Anita Allen:
I'm Anita Allen, Deputy Dean for Academic Affairs at the Univer-

sity of Pennsylvania. My interests are in the right to privacy and data protection as well as in everyday applied ethics along with theoretical ethics, women's health, and mental health.

Raju Kucherlapati:
I'm Raju Kucherlapati. I'm a Professor of Genetics and Medicine at Harvard Medical School. And I'm a geneticist.

Stephen Hauser:
Good morning. I'm Steve Hauser. I'm Chairman of the Department of Neurology at the University of California San Francisco. I'm a neurologist and an internist. My interests are in immunology and genetics. I would also say how delighted I am to be part of this group.

Amy Gutmann:
Thank you, all. We are not going to waste any time and so we are going to set a precedent of running ahead of schedule. And so let me begin to frame our deliberations.

On May 20th of this year, the J. Craig Venter Institute announced it had created the world's first self-replicating synthetic genome in a bacterial cell of a different species. This made headlines around the globe. Reaction was immediate and it spanned the spectrum. Yet thoughtful deliberation was impossible in the hours that elapsed between the breaking news and the striking commentaries.

Rather than offer an immediate opinion, President Obama asked us, his Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues, to advise him in six months' time. Six months may seem like an eternity in a culture that is accustomed to immediate response. But much stands to be gained on this and many complex issues of public importance by government taking a deliberative and open to the public approach to complex decision making.

The commission begins our deliberations today by bringing together experts, including Craig Venter, from science, medicine, ethics and other fields. And we bring them together to discuss publicly the likely benefits and risks and the appropriate ethical boundaries of this genomic border and frontier.

The life sciences, medicine and technology have experienced a level of innovation never before witnessed in human history. And their advances raise a host of complex and often controversial issues. Breakthroughs can help humanity, but they typically also carry risks. Discoveries of new ways of creating and enhancing life always raise public hopes and they also always raise public concern. This is why it is key for this commission to be an inclusive and deliberative body, encouraging the exchange of well-reasoned perspectives with the goal of making recommendations that will serve the public well and will serve the public good.

Deliberative commissions can contribute to the quality of public debate and to the quality of governmental policy. We are advisory. We will not make governmental policy, but we will advise to the best of our abilities. And we are here today because we all believe, and we believe this with the firmest commitment, that a concerned citizenry deserves nothing less.

So over the course of three public meetings, we will consider the benefits and we will begin with the benefits and the risks of advancements in synthetic biology and identify appropriate ethical boundaries. We will develop recommendations as the President charged us, and I quote, '…about any actions the federal government should take to ensure America reaps the benefits of this developing field of science, while minimizing identified risks.'

Before the year is out, we will submit our recommendations to the President. And they will be public. The work before us demands careful deliberation. The time frame demands swift action. This issue is sufficiently complex that six months' time is not a long time. I am confident that together we will create a deliberative environment that befits our task. So today's meeting has been structured to provide a variety of viewpoints. And it has also been structured to provide opportunities to begin discussing the important issues at hand.

We will begin by understanding the science. Some of the world's leading experts in the fields of synthetic biology and bioethics have joined us to share their perspectives. So that's framing it. We will have three public meetings on this subject before we issue our report. Today's meeting is meant to be an overview of what the landscape is here, but

we are going to begin, as I said, by focusing on the science: What are the likely advances in this field over the foreseeable future, what are the benefits and risks?

And we will get an overview of some of the ethical issues that it raises as well. Before we get under way, I'd like to turn the floor over to Jim Wagner, who has a few words as well to share with you all.

Jim Wagner:
A very few words. Amy, thank you. And I join you in thanking the commissioners for your commitment to the task in front of us. Welcome to you. Welcome to the experts that are here today. Thank you for being here. And to the public who has joined us.

We need also to recognize how fortunate we are to have Amy chairing us in this deliberation. Not all of you may know her, in addition to her running the presidency — running the university. I better get that right. Don't try me.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHTER]

She is expert in political philosophy, also in ethics and public policy. Those of us that know Amy know that you will learn also that she's an individual of very high energy and high integrity. We are really fortunate that she is making time. She's not doing this in her spare time, but she's making time to lead us. Amy, thank you so much for that.

And I agree that the President's charge to us is a good one. It asks us to address the implications of this current milestone that comes as a result of the announcement from the Venter lab. But before taking a breath, it asks us to anticipate the advances which may lie ahead. And I quote the key phrase that Amy quoted. 'In order to ensure that America reaps the benefits of the developing field of science while identifying appropriate ethical boundaries and minimizing identified risks.' This is a wonderful opportunity for us. It's also a serious responsibility to be able to help shape the parameters that ultimately will, we hope and trust, shape public policy. It's a charge, as I read it anyway — and I hope the commissioners read it the same way as well. It's not only asking us for cautionary recommendations, but also how best to stimulate responsibly this exciting field of research and

development, so that we discover, create and apply knowledge here in the service of humanity.

Now, clearly, we are not the first people to entertain thoughts about the ethical issues surrounding synthetic biology. Evidence of that is the notebooks already that we have had to review that just skims the surface of some of the important literature that's been accomplished.

So if we are not generating ethical views de novo, what is our job? It seems like our job is to add value by endeavoring to integrate these disparate views. I'm pleased and I hope you are, too, that we are assembled as an array of individuals that bring learned perspectives that range from business-based perspectives, faith-based, science-based, health-based, policy-based perspectives. We need to be listening to all of these points of view. And we will. Those that are energized by the seemingly limitless possibilities for good that can come from the application of these technologies, as well as those who warn that our enthusiastic, albeit well-intentioned, pursuit of this science could go forward as an undisciplined or amoral exercise of dominion over nature, such that we might ultimately suffer the consequences of our own short-sightedness in our inability to understand the value of uncontrolled diversity so that the very nature we strive to harness might actually enslave us.

We need to listen to all perspectives. So with thanks to our fellow commissioners, with thanks to our chair, with thanks to the experts that are visiting and to our commission staff, Diane, I am eager and looking forward to the next couple of days of deliberation and to working with you throughout the years. Thank you very much.

Amy Gutmann:
Thank you. Thank you, Jim. We will begin the first session in order to have more time, which I greatly welcome, for questions from the commission members and the public attending. And I thank you all again for coming and coming promptly. And so if we could ask our first set of panelists and presenters to come on up, we will get started.